



Borough of Pottstown

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Press Release - December 7, 2022

Text of Statement Read On Behalf
Pottstown Borough Council at the December 7, 2022
Committee-of-the-Whole Meeting Regarding
Temporary Homeless Shelter Located at 931 N. Franklin Street

Council is committed to, and invested in, the revitalization of our Borough. Revitalization is not something that can be achieved overnight though. It is, and will be, the result of years of strategic planning, strategic partnerships, and enforcement of our ordinances and codes.

For the past several years, this Council, together with the Borough's administration and consultants, worked, and continue to work, towards that goal. We developed and adopted countless amendments to our Zoning Ordinance, Subdivision and Land Development Ordinance, and other ordinances to lay out a plan for future development of the Borough, to be responsive to changes in the market, and to elevate our standards for the operation of businesses within the Borough. We embraced our neighboring municipalities within the Pottstown Metropolitan Regional Plan. We worked with businesses, established and new, to problem solve issues hindering development within the Borough and find balance between competing interests. We joined forces with our economic development partners who are also committed to revitalization.

Central to this work is collaboration and a respect for the work being done; work which is being done for the betterment of every member of our community.

Which is why Council is frustrated to again find itself in the position in which we are placed by Pottstown Beacon of Hope (formerly Pottstown LIFT). Beacon of Hope is a local service provider seeking to operate homeless shelters within the Borough.

The Borough repeatedly and unequivocally explained to Beacon of Hope on several occasions since 2020 that our Zoning Ordinance does not permit homeless shelters to operate within the Borough. Rather, these uses are allowed within other partnering municipalities in our region.

This is why Beacon of Hope required a use variance for the 45-bed homeless shelter they propose to build at 601 and 619 W. High Street. A variance which Council did not oppose. Rather, Council worked with Beacon of Hope to develop a comprehensive list of conditions intended to balance the needs of our homeless population, the provider's goals, and the legitimate public safety and welfare concerns of our residents, neighboring residents in West Pottsgrove, our emergency responders, and those individuals who will be using the facilities.

Nevertheless, despite full knowledge that homeless shelters are not permitted within the Borough, Beacon of Hope recently started a “pop-up,” temporary homeless shelter at St. Paul’s Church, located at 931 N. Franklin Street for up to 35 individuals.

Prior to doing so, no representative of Beacon of Hope contacted the Borough to discuss the proposed temporary shelter. Beacon of Hope did not submit a Starting-a-Business application to the Department of Licensing and Inspections. Beacon of Hope did not submit a zoning application to allow for a determination as to whether the proposed homeless shelter, as a use accessory to a church, is permitted.

After the Borough learned indirectly that Beacon of Hope wanted to operate a temporary shelter at that location, requests issued to their attorney for information went unanswered. Borough administration only learned of the details of the proposed shelter, then already in operation, after a meeting with Beacon of Hope. The Borough, not Beacon of Hope, requested the meeting.

Beacon of Hope made no effort in this instance to collaborate with the Borough. Instead, once again, this service provider prioritized its singular interests above those who may seek alternative solutions to our homelessness problem or want to ensure we are all moving in the same direction towards our goal of revitalization.

These expectations we place on all businesses – businesses which are for-profit and non-profit alike. If you want to start a business or provide a service, file the appropriate paperwork. Submit to a zoning review. Meet with Borough Administration to help coordinate resources and ensure that all health and safety concerns are addressed. A charitable mission should not exempt a provider from these standards.

On November 30, 2022, following a site visit, the Borough’s Zoning Officer issued a Notice of Violation to Beacon of Hope and St. Paul’s for illegally operating the temporary shelter at the church. It is Council’s understanding, after meeting with Church officials, that Beacon of Hope led St. Paul’s Church to believe that the temporary shelter is permitted within the Borough. The Church leased the space to Beacon of Hope based on those representations. Unfortunately, as the property owner, under the law, the church is now equally responsible for the illegal use of the property. Even if Beacon of Hope now applies for zoning relief, because the temporary shelter continues to operate without a zoning permit, despite a clear directive in the Notice for the use to cease and desist, Council is forced to weigh enforcement options against both Beacon of Hope and St. Paul’s. Council does not desire to be in an adversarial position with St. Paul’s or any other church.

Unlike Beacon of Hope though, with its singular interests, Council and Borough Administration must be concerned with a multitude of interests. We must ensure that our ordinances and codes are enforced equally and fairly.

We also must be concerned about the long-term implications to our community as a whole. As of tonight, the only homeless shelters operating in Montgomery County are located here in Pottstown. Montgomery County consists of 487 square miles with a population of almost 900,000 people. Council must do what it can to ensure that the rest of Montgomery County does its fair share to address the issue of homelessness. Wealthier municipalities in central and eastern Montgomery County need to start being part of the solution. We are already seeing an influx of homeless individuals from outside the region who, by their own admission, come here because this is where the services are located. They are leaving the places where the services are not.

Pottstown being an epicenter for societal issues more affluent communities refuse to address is nothing new. We have seen this unfair pattern for decades. With the construction of multiple subsidized housing projects and a proliferation of other subsidized housing assistance programs, Pottstown already bears a disproportionately higher concentration of living assistance programs than most every other community in Montgomery County. Other communities failing to take on their fair share of the obligation to address this problem results in a transfer to Pottstown of challenges which negatively impact our quality of life, crime, and the costs of government services paid for by our taxpayers. With the inflow of individuals with greater support needs, Pottstown became inundated with non-profits to serve them. This caused some of the Borough's most valuable real estate to be removed from the tax rolls, multiplying the burden taxpayers must bear. Consequently, Council must be mindful of the fact that this issue is not just simply about Beacon of Hope, their mission, and what they hope to achieve in the short-term.

If an exception is made for Beacon of Hope's temporary shelter at St. Paul's, then why should an exception not be made for the next one they propose? If exceptions are made for Beacon of Hope, then why should they not be made for other services providers who seek operate these "pop-up" shelters? If exceptions are made for non-profit corporations, which are still businesses like any for-profits, then should not exceptions be made for for-profit businesses which mean well or offer valuable services? These are questions with which Council is now forced to grapple and we do not appreciate it. Nor do we appreciate being portrayed as unsympathetic to the needs of our homeless.

We are sympathetic to the needs of each and every one of our residents.

This is why we are committed to strategic revitalization.

As the saying goes, a rising tide lifts all boats.